Gender Dynamics of Political Conversation:
A Comparison of Face-to-Face and Online Discussion

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Despite the stereotype that women are more talkative than men, when the topic involves political matters, women are less likely to engage in discussion with family, friends, acquaintances, or co-workers. This gender gap is found in a wide variety of settings including state legislatures and congressional hearings. Scholars point to the nature of classroom discussion as an important causal mechanism in perpetuating and intensifying this gender gap, arguing that where men dominate classroom discussions, both sexes internalize the social standing of the sexes. With the emergence of the Internet and social media as forums for discussion and with the rising popularity of online and blended instruction, my colleagues and I ask whether the relative anonymity of online conversations diminishes the gender disparity observed in face-to-face settings.

Using volunteers drawn from a student research participation pool, this study compares the dynamics of online discussion, which are treated as the experimental condition, with the control condition of face-to-face discussion. Analysis focuses on “voice” variables, such as mean words spoken or posted, number of turns taken, and proportion of discussion contributed by each participant. Frederic Vultee (Department of Communication, WSU), Jennie Sweet-Cushman (Chatham University), and Elizabeth Prough (Madonna University) are co-investigators in this research.

Mary Herring is an Associate Professor of Political Science. Her research focuses on the politics of race and gender.

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